

# Vigorous exercise keeps people thin with age

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The old adage "use it or lose it" is truer than ever. People who maintain a vigorously active lifestyle as they age gain less weight than people who exercise at more moderate levels, according to a first-of-its-kind study that tracked a large group of runners who kept the same exercise regimen as they grew older.

The study also found that maintaining exercise with age is particularly effective in preventing extreme weight gain, which is associated with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, and other diseases.

The study, conducted by Paul Williams of the U.S. Department of Energy's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (Berkeley Lab), followed 6,119 men and 2,221 women who maintained their weekly running mileage (to within three miles per week) over a seven-year period. On average, the men and women who ran over 30 miles per week gained half the weight of those who ran less than 15 miles per week.

"To my knowledge, this is the only study of its type," says Williams, a staff scientist in Berkeley Lab's Life Sciences Division. "Other studies have tracked exercise over time, but the majority of people will have changed their exercise habits considerably."

The research is the latest report from the National Runners' Health Study, a 20-year research initiative started by Williams that includes more than 120,000 runners. It appears in the May issue of the journal *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*.

Specifically, between the time subjects entered the study and when they were re-contacted seven years later, 25-to-34-year-old men gained 1.4 pounds annually if they ran less than 15 miles per week. In addition, male runners gained 0.8 pounds annually if they ran between 15 and 30 miles per week, and 0.6 pounds annually if they ran more than 30 miles per week.

This trend is mirrored in women. Women between the ages of 18 and 25 gained about two pounds annually if they ran less than 15 miles per week, 1.4 pounds annually if they ran 15 to 30 miles per week, and slightly more than three-quarters of a pound annually if they ran more than 30 miles per week. Other benefits to running more miles each week included fewer inches gained around the waist in both men and women, and fewer added inches to the hips in women.

"As these runners aged, the benefits of exercise were not in the changes they saw in their bodies, but how they didn't change like the people around them," says Williams.

Although growing older and gaining weight is something of a package deal, it isn't the same in everyone. The lucky few remain lean as they age, most people pack on several pounds, and some people become obese. The latter group is particularly at risk for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes. Fortunately, Williams' results show that maintaining exercise can combat such extreme weight gain.

"Getting people to commit to a vigorously active lifestyle while young and lean will go a long way to reducing the obesity epidemic in this country," says Williams.

Another paper published in the November 2006 issue of the journal *Obesity* by Williams and Paul Thompson of Hartford (CT) Hospital found that runners who increased their running mileage gained less

weight than those who remained sedentary, and runners that quit running became fatter.

"The time to think about exercise is before you think you need it," says Williams. "The medical journals are full of reports on how difficult it is to regain the slenderness of youth. The trick is not to get fat."

Source: Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

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